Colonial Plantations of the Lower Cape Fear

HENRY J. MacMILLAN

Recently the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc. has been given by Doctor C. P. E. Burgwyn of Norfolk, Virginia, an interesting collection of publications pertaining to the distinguished Burgwyn family and their seat, the Hermitage. As with all the families of the Cape Fear which during succeeding generations have produced prominent men, we know much of the people, their accomplishments, their marriages and their children. This is all written in the record.

What is less known is how they lived and what their houses were like. With the help of the Burgwyn papers it is possible to visualize more accurately the appearance both exterior and interior of the Hermitage than any of the other great plantations of this region. If we exclude Orton which was converted into an imposing Classic Revival mansion in the 1840s with only the little musicians gallery of the 18th century house retained, the last survivors of the Colonial houses were the Hermitage, destroyed by fire in 1881, and Hilton, demolished in the name of progress around 1900.

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Cornerstone Opened

An event of unusual historical interest occurred on January 16, 1969, at Thalian Hall in Wilmington. Directors of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, officers of the Waccamaw Bank and Trust Company, television cameramen, radio and newspaper reporters and over a hundred other persons gathered at 4:15 p.m. to witness the opening of the cornerstone of the demolished building which had once housed the College of Physicians and Surgeons on the Third Street site recently purchased by the Waccamaw Bank.

The occasion caused considerable excitement, which reached a climax when Herbert McKim of the architectural firm of Ballard, McKim and Sawyer, and Aubrey C. Johnston, local Vice-President of the Waccamaw Bank, prized open the lid on the copper box encased in the block of sandstone. The first item removed was a copy of Turner's Almanac of North Carolina for the year 1871. This and the other items were identified and displayed to the audience by Mrs. S. C. Kellam, Archivist of the Society, who had earlier read a list of the contents obtained from a newspaper account which had been preserved by Dr. Auley MacRae Crouth, Sr. Among the documents were copies of three Wilmington newspapers, Wilminton Morning Star, Wilmington Post, and Wilmington Journal, a Bible belonging to Dr. Francis King, a map of Wilmington (Turner's map of 1836), a handwritten account of the Masonic proceedings at the laying of the cornerstone in 1871, a list of the membership of St. John's Masonic Lodge No. 1, A. F. & A. M., at that time, and a published copy of the address by Dr. Francis King at the opening of the College.

In addition, about a dozen coins were recovered, one of which was dated 1793 and bore a likeness of King George III. All of them were well-preserved, as were most of the documents. However, the handwritten items had faded considerably.

The entire contents of the cornerstone, and the stone itself, will eventually be displayed in the building which the Waccamaw Bank plans to erect on Third Street for its new office in Wilmington. Mr. Lawrence R. Bowers of Whiteville, President of the Waccamaw Bank, extended greetings to all guests of the day and introduced those from out of town. The Rev. Walser H. Allen, Jr., President of the Society, delivered the invocation and presided at the unique occasion.

WALSER H. ALLEN, JR.

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Colonial Plantations

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It has been said that no section of the American colonies has lost more of its early architecture than the lower Cape Fear valley. The little town of Wilmington lived in terror of fire as is evident from the many fire regulations recorded in the 18th Century Town Book of Wilmington. The docks were often piled high with inflammables, quantities of pitch, tar and turpentine—the life blood of the port. The fears of the townspeople were justified since disastrous fires leveled parts of Wilmington in 1771, 1819, 1827 and 1843.

The apex of plantation life was during the 18th century from 1730 until about 1812 when economic depression and the war with England caused great difficulties. By the 19th century many of the finest colonial houses were already disappearing. The rice plantations were malarial and the owners preferred to live in town where life expectancy was greater. The deserted houses were victims of deterioration due to neglect and humid climate as well as destruction by fire.

ARCHITECTURE OF CAPE FEAR HOUSES

What were these Cape Fear plantations like? Were any of them fine structures such as survive in other parts of the country or were they simple pioneer dwellings? Unfortunately our local historians seem to have had no architectural interest or curiosity. They were writing at a time when colonial Georgian architecture and decoration was out of fashion and excised no interest.

When Cornelius Harnett's residence Maynard later called Hilton was razed there was no effort made to measure or photograph the important historic house for the record. The only surviving photograph of the interior, a poor snapshot, shows an extremely handsome room panelled in Georgian style. The exterior as shown in photographs and engravings was highly sophisticated interpretation of the Georgian period. It occupied a site so imposing that Janet Schaw writing in 1775 said that "in all my life I never saw a more glorious situation. On this there is a very handsome house, and properly situated to enjoy every advantage." It is ironic that the only house in the Wilmington environs to survive almost in tact from the early 18th century is Sloop Point, the Sound plantation of John Baptista Ashe. The structure has been dated by Thomas T. Waterman as circa 1728, so it was possibly built by John Baptista Ashe himself, later passing by inheritance to General John Ashe. It is not known that any of the Ashes lived at Sloop Point (originally called Ashe's Neck) although they must have used it as a secondary residence. There are still traces of a road which connected the Ashe lands on the North East river with Sloop Point. The house has been photographed, measured and described so often there is no need to repeat the details. Large though the house and brick kitchen are for the period in which they were built, they cannot be accepted as an example of a fine Cape Fear plantation. It was not the formally laid out country seat of a gentleman but rather the utilitarian dwelling probably built to house the owner when overseeing the commercial activities including the ship building and shipping in sloops which went on at the point.

The location of Sloop Point is approximately twenty five miles from the Cape Fear River—the distance marking the geographical limit of the ban placed on settlement in the Lower Cape Fear Valley by the Lords Proprietors after the failure of the Clarendon Colony in 1667. This ban was lifted or at least ignored by Governor George Burrington who reopened the land office about 1723.

Architectural characteristics of the seventeenth rather than eighteenth century are apparent in the Sloop Point building. When Frances Benjamin Johnston saw the place she said that there was no older structure on the Carolina Coast than the brick building containing the kitchen. Thus it is possible that the location was settled even before 1726, year of the original grant recently discovered in the records of Carteret Precinct by Mrs. Ida B. Kellam.

MAYNARD later called HILTON

A photograph at time of demolition.

It surprises us to learn from the journal of a traveler from Georgia in 1734, only nine years after the settlement of Brunswick and before the incorporation of Wilmington, there were already substantial houses on Cape Fear Plantations. The traveler described Kendal the residence of "King" Roger Moore: "His house is built of brick and exceedingly pleasantly situated... He has a prospect of the town of Brunswick and of another beautiful brick house (Lilliput), a building about half a mile from him belonging to Eleazer Allen, Esq..." It is amazing that in the early 18th century the land had been cleared to such an extent that the vistas described would have been possible. They would not be today. The same traveler speaks of Blue Banks where Mr. Moore is planning to build "another very large brick house."

A brief but provocative description by the same man of Mr. John Davis' house enables us to imagine its design since we know what the characteristics of the Dutch style were. "This house is built after the Dutch fashion, and made to front both ways—on the river, and on the land. He has a beautiful avenue cut through the woods for about two miles, which is a great addition to the house."

Another house of this period although not of the Dutch or Jacobean style was Russellborough built after the West Indian manner with double galleries or piazzas as they were then called. A very complete description by Governor William Tryon exists of Russellborough and the site has been expertly excavated by archaeologists of the North Carolina Department of Historic Sites under the direction of Stanley South. This charming estate with avenue, gardens, outbuildings, all planned with elegant formality, is detailed in the Sauthier map of 1769.
There were two massive brick houses on the North East River which were built by two brothers, Samuel and John Swann. They were called respectively The Oak and Swann Point. Dr. John Hampden Hill said that "the two mansions must have been and probably were the finest and most stately in the whole Cape Fear region, and seemed to have been designed for the occupancy of large families or the entertainment of numerous guests.”

The Oak home of the Speaker Samuel Swann, was the grander of the two Swann houses. Sarah William Ashe in her reminiscences of Cape Fear Plantations wrote that "This residence with its mahogany stairs and carved wood work was the handsomest in the Province.” In one of his "notes" on Dr. John Hampden Hill's Stories of the Old Plantations, Captain Samuel A. Ashe wrote:

"The Oaks that was destroyed by fire after it was bought by Mr. Duncan Moore and was rebuilt by him about 1816, was subsequently destroyed again. I visited the ruins in 1858 with a party of the Moore girls, and the traditions which they had about mahogany stair cases and other such splendors seemed to be justified by the ruins. Such parts as I saw recalled the finest residences of a city. They told me that the old house had a fish pond on top of it."

During the eighteenth century roof cisterns, generally made of lead, were in use in England and it is quite possible that the fish pond was really a cistern. Another explanation within the realm of possibility was that the fish pond was a cupola.

"At the Oak, and again during the Civil War the Confederates constructed breast works and fought a delaying action against the enemy in the same place. This brings to mind the statement of Inglis Fletcher to the writer explaining the disappearance of most of the Cape Fear Plantations houses, "You must remember two wars were fought on its soil while the Albemarle was relatively untouched.""

The original tract of 640 acres, the nucleus of the large acreage of Hyrchnam was a gift in 1716 to Captain Edward Hyrne by Colonel Maurice Moore. After Hyrchnam came into possession of Henry Hyrne Watters, a minor, it was advertised for rent as a "large commodious house having four good rooms on a floor with four dry cellars." When Thomas Hill offered it for sale in 1807 it was described as "a large, handsome, brick, 2 story dwelling house."

Lillington Hall was one of those houses which were victims of inaccurate drawings in "Lossing's Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution" and "Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion." Other maligned houses were The Burgwin-Wright house, Hilton, William Hooper's Town residence, and the so-called first house in Wilmington. In the case of Lillington Hall the simple wooden farm house depicted is not even the house supposedly represented.

Sarah William Ashe, sister of Captain Samuel A. Ashe, to whom James Sprunt's Chronicles of the Cape Fear River is dedicated, wrote that "Lillington Hall was" a very handsome, large brick house. I spent a week there once, in 1866, and remember well the house and the burial ground with its white tombstones. On some of the windowpanes of the house the names of Revolutionary soldiers were cut. The graveyard, surrounded by a wall and very near the site of the house, is still remarkably well preserved by the Pender County Historical Society. A remnant of the library of Lillington Hall is the special glory of The North Carolina Collection at The University at Chapel Hill.

Point Pleasant must have been a very lovely place. It seems reasonable that Mrs. Francis Corbin would not have chosen to live there otherwise since she was deemed the Cupola House in Edenton by her husband and would not have been apt to give up that fascinating house for one inferior. Janet Schaw, the critical Lady of Quality said the plate, linen, furniture, jewels and clothes of the house were very considerable. The house is very handsome and quite on a British plan. The place is a peninsula that runs into the river (The North East) and is justly called Point Pleasant. It stands on a fine lawn, with the noblest scattered trees in the world thro' it." The house was burned before 1782, perhaps a casualty of The Revolution.

BELVEDERE, opposite from and within sight of Wilmington, was at one time the residence of Governor Benjamin Smith. It was the scene of the entertainment given by him for President George Washington in 1791. Washington was greeted at the river landing by thirteen young ladies representing the thirteen colonies. They escorted him to the brick residence over a flower strewn path.

William Watts Jones, in 1832, described Belvedere as "The handsomest and most pleasant residence in this part of the country." Jones said that "the premises are a comfortable and convenient two story dwelling house and a building one and a half story with kitchen," also there is a "wash house, stable, carriage house, smoke house, etc." He also listed a barn 110 feet long and 40 feet wide which was two stories high. Also an overseer's house and kitchen, all which buildings are of brick, put up in the most substantial manner."

The shipping facilities of Belvedere must have been particularly good. "There is another barn built of wood—directly at the river, from which the rice can be conveniently thrown into a flat or vessel; and any vessel that can come over the bar can come to the barn.""}

As was usual in such descriptions there is no mention of design or style but this large group of buildings erected during the Georgian era must have had, at the very least, a certain period charm.

These are only a few of the sixty-six plantations briefly sketched by Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell. They are, however, ones about which a word of description has come down to us. They are mentioned to show that the Hermitage was
not an isolated beautiful house but stood as one of a large group of
country houses which must have exemplified architecturally
the dignity and distinction of the Colonial Georgian style.

THE HERITAGE

What a splendid place this must have been with its acres of
gardens designed with elegant formality expressing perfect-
ly the civilization recently transplanted to the American wild-
erness. The English architect John Hawk, who was brought
to the Province by Governor William Tryon for the design-
ging and construction of his "palace" at New Bern at the same
time the Hermitage was built (1771), may possibly have had
a hand in its development. Mrs. Caroline B. Clitheroe, only
daughter of John Burgwin, states that her father employed an
English architect and Hawks was the only one in the colony
as far as is known. Although John Burgwin was known as
a man of great taste, the house and gardens would seem to
have required the knowledge of a professional to execute.

All the fashionable elements of Georgian design were em-
ployed in the ten acres of pleasure grounds of the Hermitage.
The long alleys with a terminal feature, the formal flower beds,
fish pond, the naturalistic Bosques whose naturalism fooled
no one, and even that indispensable crown of an 18th Century
garden, a mount topped by a little pavilion.

We are fortunate indeed to have the first impressions of
Caroline Burgwin of the garden when she arrived from Eng-
lond in 1801 at the age of seventeen. Her father instructed
her brother to show her the gardens. "These were extensive
and beautifully laid out. There were alcoves and summer houses
at the termination of each walk, seats under trees in the more
shady recesses of the Big Garden, as it was called, in distinction
from the flower garden in front of the house. There were
many evergreens and a creek winding its way through the
grounds... In a small brick building called the Study on a
high mound in the Big Garden was a fine collection of books,
writing desk and tables."

John Burgwin in England in 1797 wrote: "The Mansion
House is large, elegant, and commodious for a large family,
with barn, stabling for twenty horses, cow houses, pigeon
house, and every other outhouse convenient or necessary."

At the death of Burgwin the Hermitage was offered for sale
and the following informative advertisement appeared in The
Wilmington Gazette on September 27, 1803:

That elegant and highly improved Villa called The Hermit-
age, situated eight miles from town, on which is a Range of
Buildings handsomely finished, upwards of one hundred feet
in length, with Offices and a number of convenient out
Buildings in good repair. The Gardens and Pleasure Grounds
of about ten acres, are disposed with much taste, and in point
of beauty and improvement equal to any in the United States.
There are about eight hundred acres of Land annexed to the
premises, with good Barns, Stables and other Buildings requi-
site for farming. Also a good Mill Seat contiguous to Navi-
gation."

James G. Burr described the Hermitage in more detail in
1885 only four years after it burned on Easter while the fam-
ily was at Church. His account is so interesting it should be
quoted in full:

The mansion house was beautifully located and presented a
very imposing appearance. It was about one hundred and
twenty feet long, the north front faced a sloping lawn extend-
ing about one hundred and fifty yards to Prince George's
Creek, and the south front faced a large flower garden, from
which extended a broad avenue about a half mile long, with
a double row of elms on each side, continued by a carriage
way of more than a mile in length, under ditch and banks,
through the pines, until it entered the county road leading to
Wilmington. The avenue was almost entirely destroyed by a
tornado, about sixty years ago. The house contained sev-
eventeen rooms, with a light well ventilated stone cellarege extend-
ing under the whole. The building was of the most substau-
tial character. Instead of weather boarding, the two wings
were sided with cypress shingles, which after the lapse of
more than a hundred years were as sound and solid as when
first nailed on. It is stated that they were gotten out under
contract by Col. Samuel Ashe of Rocky Point, then a young
man, and subsequently of revolutionary fame. The framing
timbers were very large and solid, and being of heart pitch
pine, stood for many hours after the sides and roof had burned
away, at the fire which destroyed it in the year 1881, pre-
senting a very striking appearance as they stood in relief
against the sky, erect and in place, a mass of blaze and heat.

The furniture was of massive mahogany, the greater part
of it imported from England, with none of the deceptive
veneering now in general use, but solid and substantial,
intended not simply for ornament but service, and for the
use of future generations. During the late war the mansion
was occupied by a regiment of Federal troops and greatly
desecrated. All of the books, papers and family records, were
destroyed, and the venerable furniture broken up or given
to negroes. The large and very valuable oil painting set in
a panel over the mantelpiece in the Drawing Room, and
which was so much admired by visitors, was picked to pieces
with their bayonets by the soldiers in search of concealed
treasure, some of the fragments being afterwards found in
the garden.

The history of that picture, as I have always understood
it, presents the character of Mr. Burgwin in such an admir-
able light that it well deserves to be recorded. On his return
to America, after the close of the Revolutionary War, he
found himself greatly embarrassed by the debts which he
owed in England, incurred before the war, while a great part
of those which were due him in America could not be col-
lected, owing to insolvencies and the Statute of Limitations,
and other obstacles interposed by his debtors. His English
debts were barred by law, and wholly uncollectable, as his creditors
well knew. Yet, notwithstanding his great losses on this side,
which nearly sacrificed his whole estate, such was his high
sense of honor and indomitable energy, that he did not rest
until he had paid off every dollar he owed, although the
struggle continued through one-half of his remaining years.
It was to mark their appreciation of his honorable conduct
that the merchants of the celebrated "Lloyd's Coffee House"
had the picture painted and sent to him.

It represented a forest scene, a dark thunder storm arising
in the distance, and in the foreground two horses drawing a
heavy load, straining every muscle in their efforts to get it in
before the storm should be upon them. It was greatly admired
by connoisseurs, but its beauties were lost upon the vandals
who destroyed it, their sodid nature not being capable of see-
ing in a beautiful work of art, anything but a supposed place
of concealment for hidden treasure. Its loss has naturally been
greatly deplored by the surviving members of the family, for
they felt a just pride in possessing such a souvenir of their
ancestor reflecting so much honor upon him. The subject
of the picture was happily chosen, symbolizing, as it did, the
herculean efforts of Mr. Burgwin to relieve himself of em-
arrassments when surrounded by the dark clouds of adversity.

About the year 1767 Mr. Burgwin was appointed Treas-
urer of the Province of North Carolina, and held the office
with credit and honor to himself under the Royal Governors
Tryon and Martin during the stormy years which preceded the
Revolution.
There were two rooms in the Hermitage we know by name, the Long Hall and the Library. The Long Hall, as the drawing room was called, was where Burgwin fell in 1775 during a game of Blind Mans Buff, broke his leg and lay on a mattress in the same room for eleven weeks. It was this accident which necessitated his return to England for the bone to be reset, although the heat of the political climate and his Loyalist sympathies probably had much to do with his leaving the Colony. John Burgwin's genial disposition and charm, so apparent in his portrait by Copley, must have had much to do with the return to him of his property confiscated during The Revolution.

The Library has been described by Sallie Burgwin and it was likely similar to the upstairs drawing room in the Burgwin-Wright house built by Burgwin at exactly the same time as the Hermitage. The facade of the Hermitage was more than twice as long as the Town house. The treatment of the book niches with their classic sculpture in the Hermitage may have been like the wall elevation in the Town house drawing room with its niches divided by pilasters.

Although Thomas T. Waterman thought the expert workmanship of the Burgwin-Wright house interiors indicated they may have been executed by other than local workmen, it is stated by John Burgwin's daughter that the work was done by her father's own slaves. There were so many substantial houses built in the Cape Fear section during this period it seems reasonable to assume there were good craftsmen available in Wilmington at the time. In a letter dated April 13, 1894 Miss Sallie describes the library:

I can see it now as it was built in the wall of the old place. The busts of two Roman emperors — Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla — and Faustina, the mother of Marcus Aurelius, were placed in a niche just above the library. These busts seemed to guard the old books. . . . I think these books must have been placed there by my grandfather. His name was in many of them, with the crest and the coat of arms of the family.

The grandmother of the writer knew the Hermitage well and as a bridesmaid waited on her cousin Francis Ann Johnston when she married John B. Parker. There in the late 1870s when asked by her grandson, eager for a detailed description of the interiors, she replied, “The rooms were beautifully panelled with elaborate carving and "Aunt Margaret hung Spanish moss on all the mouldings." An answer both tantalizing and depressing but typical of the inexact and inadequate descriptions of all those who knew the surviving buildings of the Colonial Cape Fear.

It is accepted by historians that a remarkable group of men came to the Cape Fear in Colonial days. Their contribution to founding a new state and nation is recognized. "The plantation on which I reside," the phrase used in their legal documents, has almost entirely vanished. There are only little bits and pieces of information about these dwellings. The gift to The Society of the material on the Hermitage, together with less complete references from other sources, gives us a glimpse of the high architectural attainments of the Lower Cape Fear section, called by Governor Martin "the region of politeness and hospitality."

FOOTNOTES
1Sprunt, James. Chronicles of the Cape Fear River. Raleigh, 1914. pp. 139-144
8The Wilmington Gazette. August 23, 1808.
9The Wilmington Chronicle and Carolina Advertiser. September 23, 1775.
11The Cape Fear Recorder. May 21, 1832.
12Andrews. op. cit. p. 289 and p. 172
13Burr, James G. The Hermitage, of the series Old Mansions of Cape Fear. Wilmington, 1887.
14The quotations from members of the Burgwin family are all from The Burr pamphlet.
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